

### Poor Bobby

My grandmother named her hummingbird Bobby. She was convinced that the same bird came back to her, year after year. I used to sort of dismiss that idea, until I began feeding hummingbirds at my place on the Chippewa National Forest. I generally don't put up my feeders until the birds tell me that they are back from their winter away. They do that by buzzing me as soon as I walk out the kitchen door. It sure seems to me that these are birds that are accustomed to finding their food just off my back step.



Named for the male's bright colors, the ruby-throated hummingbird is the only species of breeding hummingbird in eastern North America. The wings of the hummingbird are what make a humming sound, with a wing-beat of about 53 beats per second. Feather shapes of the male hummingbird are responsible for a variety of sounds you will hear as the males chase, dive, and display for the females.

As anyone with a feeder knows, hummingbirds are strongly territorial. The male's territory is centered on food sources, and the chasing of other hummingbirds accounts for much of the busy nature of the feeder. The male's chasing isn't limited to other males. When a female first enters his territory, the male hummer will first harass, but not evict her. This can be followed by what is aptly named a "dive display", which is a series of u-shaped looping dives that may begin as high as 50 feet above the female. You will know when the female has perched somewhere even if you cannot see her, because the male will shift to something called a "shuttle display", in which he performs a series of extremely quick, close, side-to-side horizontal arcs. I don't know what name there is for a dance I have seen more than once, involving hummingbirds flying in and out of my sprinkler. Perhaps I will call it the "bathing display".

In case you think male hummers are not serious when they are chasing intruders, there are sometimes physical encounters. These can include jabbing with that long bill, and striking with their tiny feet.

You would think a guy that goes to all this trouble to court a gal would stick around, but male hummingbirds do not hang around their women, and yes, it's likely he has more than one. After courtship and breeding, the female is off to build her nest. Should the male visit her at the nest site while she builds it, she generally ignores his Shuttle Display and frenzied sounds he makes.

With an outside diameter of about 2 inches, the little nest is made of thistle or dandelion down, held together with spider webbing. Little bits of lichen or moss camouflage the exterior. The 2 tiny eggs take about 2 weeks to hatch, with the babies leaving the nest by about 3 weeks old. Mama hummer takes care of her young with no help at all from the father.

We may know them best from our feeders, but hummingbirds don't just eat sugar-water and nectar. They also catch insects like mosquitoes and gnats in midair, or pull them out of spider webs. Tree sap is taken when nectar is scarce or unavailable. The foraging behavior of hummingbirds results in the pollination of many species of flowers.

A long-distance migrant, this little bird that weighs about the same as a nickel, winters through north-central Mexico to central Costa Rica. Just before they migrate, hummingbirds build a layer of rich, fatty fuel just under their skin, often doubling their body mass. Over land, they likely do not fly much above treetop height, which is thought to be so that they can see food sources along their migratory route.

It is estimated that south-bound hummingbirds average about 23 miles per day, travelling midday and feeding early morning and late afternoon. An important food source for these southerly migrating hummers is flowering spotted jewelweed.

Many of these birds fly nonstop across the Gulf of Mexico, having been reported to migrate just above the wave tops. They have been observed 100 – 200 miles from land, reported by shrimp fishermen and oil rig workers. The journey across the ocean may require 22 non-stop hours of flight. That rather boggles the mind, when you consider that a headwind of more than 20 mph will push a hummingbird backward. One study indicates that the birds wait for weather fronts to use wind to their benefit, to carry them on their way across the water.

The male hummers precede females, going both north and south; the young do not follow their parents, and they do not fly in flocks. Climate change appears to be causing the birds to depart for the north earlier than in the past, which sometimes has quite poor results in the north, if flowering and nectar production has been delayed.

Once on its wintering grounds, the hummingbirds exhibit site fidelity reminiscent of what we see when they return to us every year. Twenty-five percent of hummingbirds banded in Costa Rica were recaptured again in following years.

The peak return trip north is not in synchrony with the flowering of any particular plant species. However, the arrival on the northern breeding grounds seems to depend on earlier arrival of the yellow-bellied sapsucker, to guarantee availability of sap in absences of reliable nectar production. One wonders how many folks who hang hummingbird feeders in their yards also curse the activities of sapsuckers on their yard trees, and never realize there is a connection between these species.

House cats are thought to be the most common predator of the hummingbird, a fact we sadly learned at my house when I hung a feeder too low, and one of my farm cats swatted a hummer out of the air. My daughter, Libby, was about 6 at the time, and was fascinated with the chance to actually hold one of these birds in her hand. I was surprised to discover several days later that she had been carrying it around in a purse, planning to take it for show-and-tell at school. It was interesting to learn there are accounts of attacks on hummingbirds by praying mantises, dragonflies, and frogs, and that they occasionally get caught in spider webs.

The recent, sudden influx of many more hummingbirds to our feeders indicates that the young have fledged the nest. Poor little “Bobby” is looking a bit frazzled these days, as he attempts to exclude all these interlopers. Nothing I’ve read suggests what possible adaptive benefit there may be to attempting to keep what are likely your own offspring from the best food source around!

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